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AUTHOR Guardiola, Gloria
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ABSTRACT

Established in 1970 and operated by the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans, the George I. Sanchez Junior Senior High School (Houston, Texas) is an alternative school for Hispanics in grades 7-12. The school, staffed originally by volunteers, acquired a full-time executive director in 1973, established relations whith the Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 1975, obtained accreditation in 1978, and graduated its first class in 1979. Like many alternative schools, the George I. Sanchez school faces challenges in the areas of curriculum development, accreditation, staffing, resource development, equipment, and especially funding. Although the Sanchez school has obtained funding from the Model Cities Program, the Emergency School Aid Act, and the Department of Justice, it still faces funding problems. Because most of the students come from lower socio-economic status families, they cannot pay tuition. The school serves the community in several important ways: as the last resort for many Hispanic students, as an ombudsman for the Hispanic community with HISD, and as a liaison between parents and schools. Alternative schools provide various advantages for Hispanic students including opportunity for a high school education, better student-teacher relationships, and better self-concept. (SB)

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ALTERNATIVES IN EDUCATION

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by

Gloria Guardiola
Executive Director

Association for the Advancement
of Mexican Americans
204 Clifton
Houston, Texas 77011
(713) 926-9491

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Alternatives in Educations

Why do alternative schools have to exist? Let me give you our experience in Houston, Texas, which is where the George I Sanchez Junior Senior High School is operated. The Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans (AAMA), which operates the George I. Sanchez Junior Senior High School, was formed in 1970 because a group of neighborhood people in Houston were very concerned about the very high dropout situation among Hispanics in Houston. In 1970, it was estimated that approximately 70-75% of Hispanics dropped out of the public schools. Now, the statistics compare with the national average of 35-40%, but if you ask the Houston Independent School District (HISD) what percentage of students drop out, they'll tell you it's 14%. The reason for that disparity is because of the the way HISD compiles the statistics. If a young person finishes the school year and then does not return to school in the fall, they have no way of knowing if that young person moved out of the school district or what happened to that student.

Basically, what I want to talk about is "Why the George I. Sanchez Junior Senior High School?" As I mentioned, we started in 1970 because we were concerned about the dropout problem. At that time AAMA was an organization based on volunteers, but you can only go so far with volunteers. For three years we existed on the good will of people who would come in after working hours and work with some of these high school drop-outs, and try and give them some counseling, some arts and crafts, and just actiyities in general, because they knew that if they were not involved in activities that they would also be out on the streets, bored and engaging in delinquent behavior. In 1973, Dr. Luis Cano was hired as a full-time executive director and through his leadership and guidance, we were able to obtain some money and start the first educational program. In 1975 a non-financial agreement

was reached with the HISD, whereby we would take approximately 100 young people per year. We would enroll them in a HISD shcool for half a day and, half a day we would provide them with academic instruction at AAMA. That was approved by the school district, and we got our accreditation through the school district. Initially, we operated with moneys from the Model Cities Program, and also we were able to obtain Emergency School Aid Act monies. We also had a research and development component in our agency, and we were able to research other sources of funding. At that time the Department of Justice had money available for alternative education for young people who were either delinquent, or at risk of being delinquent. That's where most of our dropouts fit, so that was perfect and we received a 3-year contract. Unfortunately, we are now at the end of our third year, with no hope of additional funds unless we get support from the private sector, or unless the school district can help us out. It doesn't look very positive on either side, but we are working diligently.

Now I want to talk about some of the challenges facing alternative schools The first thing that comes to mind, the biggest challenge, is funding. It sounds great to say that there are young people who are not going to function in the school system and we need to provide them with alternative methods or alternative schooling, but then the question is, how are you going to fund that alternative education project? Because the reality is that most of the young people who need alternative education programs come from a lower socio-economic status, and therefore, their families are not able to pay tuition. So, you have to find alternative methods of funding. The private sector needs to help us out here. The local school system has had to recognize that there are a lot of students that, even they will admit privately, will not be admitted into their schools. So something needs to be done. Now, unfortunately with the economic recession and the hard times that

we are facing, many people, when you ask them for money will say, "Well we pay our taxes, so the public school systems should be able to provide education for everyone. That's what we pay our taxes for." Well, that sounds great, but I think they should also be telling that to the local school district. The local education system that we work with says that they have an alternative education system, and that they want our young people farmed out to their alternative schools. The thing is, some of these young people have already dropped out -- even from their alternative education system. They cannot function because they need a more personalized kind of instruction; they feel lost. The other thing is that many of these youth are disruptive youth, and disruptive youth just do not fit into a large school, where the smallest class might be 30 students and one teacher. Therefore, one of the largest challenges is finding monies to keep going.

Another important challenge is curriculum development. It's great to talk about offering alternative education, but what is alternative education? What is a good curriculum? Unless you have someone on your staff or you can afford to hire someone to develop that curriculum, then it is going to be very difficult to provide a good curriculum that is not only going to instruct young people, but also challenge them to want to learn. Developing a good curriculum is one of the biggest challenges. It is no good to simply bring the young people into your building and say, "Well, o.k., you can't function in the public schools, so we're going to provide you with an alternative education." You're going to give them the same thing they've been getting in the public schools, and it won't go.

Another challenge is accreditation. Every state has different rules for accreditation. One of the things that we found in Texas, was that it was not that hard for us to get accredited. We have to teach all the required subjects. We teach English, math, the social sciences, and we teach physical

education. We also provide some other activities and electives. Our school takes young people who are drop-outs, or at risk of dropping out. What we call "at risk" are those who have a very high absentee rate. High absenteeism is an indicator that a student will eventually drop out. The other thing is that we have to have a certain number of teachers who are certified by the state of Texas, or that are qualified to be certified. The young people in our school are 7th - 12th graders, and as we are now accredited we are able to graduate students. In 1978, we received our accreditation and in 1979, we had our first graduating class. Since 1979 we have graduated approximately 31 young people. That's 31 young people who would probably have dropped out of school. We have also served approximately 500 young people by providing them with a high school education. We have probably served another 500 by providing counseling and getting them to go back into the schools. We have a very low dropout rate because the young people at the George I. Sanchez school are there because they want to be. If they do leave, they leave to go back to the public school system. They are able to return successfully because at George I. Sanchez they have gained a measure of self-confidence, and are then able to function within the school system.

Another challenge that alternative schools face is staffing. How can you compete as a community-based organization with school district salaries? How can AAMA compete with the salaries that are being paid by the Houston Independent School District? Teachers may be paid inadequately in Houston, but for Texas, which has traditionally paid its teachers very poorly, Houston is one of the highest paying school districts. When an alternative school is not affiliated with a school district, you have to compete with public school salaries in order to hire certified staff. Unless you get some very

dedicated teachers whose first priority is helping Hispanics get a good education, you're going to have trouble with staffing.

Resource development is another challenge. If you happen to have enough money to pay the rent on the buildings, and enough to pay your staff, then more than likely you will not have the money to pay for other resources. I'm talking about books and supplies. Let's face it, not only can low-income students not afford to pay tuition, more than likely they cannot even pay for supplies. What we do is ask parents to contribute for supplies. If they can't, we don't kick them out or anythings, but we do ask them if they can at least contribute $10 a month towards supplies. This fee is not only for school supplies, but also because we also feel that within an alternative system, you also have to provide students with some alternative activites. So we do lots of things like field trips and camp-outs. The reason we do this is because lots of the young people are engaged in delinquent behavior and they are undisciplined. In the outdoors and at the campgrounds, they have to learn some teamwork, and how to work together. They have to learn to work together in order to survive.

One of the biggest problems we have is equipment. We can have the best science teacher, but if we don't have a lab table, or microscopes or other science equipment, how good is our science class. A book alone is not enough. Equipping your school adequately, that's another challenge.

What type of role does alternative education play in the community? I can only tell you from our experience at the George I. Sanchez school and our involvement with young people in Houston over the last 10 years.

For many of the youth, the George I. Sanchez school is the last resort. If they do not go there, they more than likely will drop out. Often many many young people are sent to us by the juvenile justice authorities. They tell them, "If you don't go to George I. Sanchez, if you don't go to AAMA, you're going to a juvenile facility." It's their last resort. Believe me,

the George I. Sanchez school is a very good alternative, because at least the young people can go home after they leave school.

The school also serves as an omsbudsman between the Hispanic community and the Houston Independent School District. Oftentimes, parents will call us and ask us for assistance in facilitating a child's attendence in the public school system. Sometimes we have to intervene and talk with a principal, and get that principal and parent together so that the children can avail themselves of the educational opportunities in the HISD. Also, the school district will often call us, saying, "Look, I'm having a problem with this student, and I understand that you work with this type of youngster, so could you give me some advice." So we do play an omsbudsman role, not only for the parents, but also for the school district.

Another role that we play is getting parents involved in the education of their children. One of the biggest complaints that most schools have is that Hispanic parents do not get involved in the education of their students. They don't come to PTA meetings. My reply to that is, how many Anglo parents attend PTA meetings these days? Anyway, the other thing they say is that when they have Open House the parents don't show up, or they never ask for a conference with the teacher. Well, first of all, the biggest problem is that there are not that many Hispanic teachers. Therefore, even though the schools may be in the barrio, the teachers are not Hispanic or do not speak Spanish. Teachers and other school personnel need to either make home visits or be available after 5 p.m. to meet with parents. Many parents work and cannot take time off for school conferences. Mother at home often do not have transportation or baby sitters and therefore are unable to go to the school during regular school hours.

In summary, the advantages of alternative schools for Hispanic students include:

- The opportunity to obtain a high school education;
- A pathway to post-secondary education and increased employment opportunities;
- Students can participate in their own learning process;
- Availability of one-to-one relationships with teachers and counselors due to lower student/teacher ratios;
- An academic curriculum with a socio-political awareness;
- Improvement of self-concept;
- Preparation to be better parents with concern for their children's futures;
- A feeling of pride and a sense of community control of the school; and
- A sense of kinship, concept of "familia", teamwork.